

"I'm in the streets after school, but I'd rather be playing games with kids my age..." "The problem is some kids just want to go to somebody's house and smoke weed and do ecstasy, and some parents allow it..." "You don't know what people will do to get a cigarette..." "It's so easy to get cigarettes. Stores don't care where the money comes from..." "Drugs are everywhere." "Parents act clueless, but they're probably turning a blind eye..." "Messages have to be about real people to get through to school kids look up to them partying and "We've gone way black. Now the sexuality. People talk about it." anyone can do. A lot of mind that they are



suffering kids " "Middle older kids and see doing bad stuff" beyond white and problem is are scared to "Bullying... is something people have the frame of better than others.."

In Their Own Words

How Maryland teens perceive their lives and what they think would help alleviate the problems that trouble them most.



A Special Report by
Maryland Attorney General J. Joseph Curran, Jr.

August 17, 2002

In Their Own Words

A special message from Maryland Attorney General

J. Joseph Curran, Jr.



Dear Citizens of Maryland:

At times it felt as though a dam had burst, with the thoughts and feelings of young people across Maryland spilling forth:

"Kids don't just wake up one day and say,
'I'm going to be bad.'"

"I'm in the streets after
school, but I'd rather be
playing games with kids
my age."

"There's nothing going on but
drugs and smoking -
marijuana and cigarettes."

"Having someone there you
know you can talk to makes all the
difference."

"Bullying happens all the time. Kids get
mad, and that's why they bring guns to
school. It makes me so mad that I have to be
afraid to go to school."

"Adults don't talk to us enough."



"Drugs are not in one place. They're
everywhere."

"Kids who act out - they
usually have problems at
home. Someone should reach
out to those kids. If they had
someone to talk to,
it would help."

"Everything goes back to the
parents. All these problems
we're talking about basically
start at home."

"You hear about violence everywhere - on
the news, the radio. You can't really run
from violence - it will always catch you."

"Kids these days say they don't want parents
to be parents, but deep down inside we want
someone to tell us what to do."

THESE ARE THE VOICES OF OUR YOUTH.

In forums held in every county in Maryland over the past year, I have heard our children talk about what is right and what is wrong in their lives. With eloquence, anger, laughter, hope, and often wisdom beyond their years, they have had a lot to say. Willingly and forth-

rightly, with different styles and perspectives, they have shared their feelings and experiences about a wide range of issues, like how they spend their free time, their use of tobacco, drugs and alcohol, how bullying, discrimination, and violence affect them, and the role of adults in their lives.

As Attorney General, I see daily the tragedy of children - as victims of crime, as perpetrators of crime, children who will become the adult victims and offenders of tomorrow. Children who simply will not reach the potential which could have been theirs. Preventing this cycle of crime, violence and failure is the single greatest challenge of law enforcement and has driven my tenure as Attorney General. And it is why, after many years of promoting different aspects of juvenile crime prevention, I decided it was time to hear from our children themselves.

They have now spoken. Some of what they say will not surprise anyone who has spent time around a teenager. Other problems and feelings they describe will startle in their scope and severity. Yet it all bears repeating, because *we have not been listening*. In too many instances, in too many ways, we have not responded.

We must act on what these children have had the courage to tell us. This diverse group of teens, hailing from every urban, suburban, and rural corner of our State, have drawn pictures of their lives which are by no means identical. Yet together they create a mosaic which represents a cry for help. The specifics of their message are varied, but its essence is very simple:

Our youth want adults to be front and center in their lives.

With their often crusty and rebellious exteriors, teens will not always admit it, but they need and want their parents or other adults to help them navigate their adolescence.

This message sends different signals to

different people. First, policy-makers need to develop more adult-supervised, attractive activities for cynical teenagers. Government and business leaders must provide support and resources for such programs. Educators must make sure all students have an adult within the walls of their school with whom they feel connected.

Second, parents must not be afraid to be parents. Recent research gives us concrete evidence of what, at some level, we already

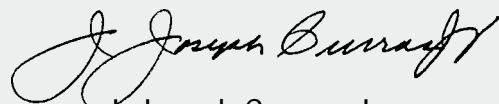
know. Youth whose parents are "hands-on" - who set and enforce clear rules and expectations and are involved in their children's lives without trying to be "pals" - these youth fare better. They are at much less risk of all the dangers which tempt our teens every day.

Finally, everyone else - every citizen who cares about our children and our future -

must use one hour a week to mentor a child who needs an extra boost to cross that divide from failure to success. Through my program *Mentor Maryland*, I challenge all Marylanders to join the effort to combat crime, victimization and failure by becoming a mentor for a child who needs help.

Providing our children a safe and successful journey to adulthood is our collective responsibility. As parents, as policy-makers, as citizens, we must listen to our children and heed their words. No matter how vigorously they may resist it, we must not let them grow up by themselves.

Sincerely,



J. Joseph Curran, Jr.
Attorney General



Executive Summary

Some slouched in their seats. Others whispered and giggled self-consciously. Many averted their eyes and looked grumpy or downright hostile. Most kept glancing over at the food. Yet when the students began to speak, all the adults in the room - from county commissioners to judges, legislators, educators and law enforcement officials - sat forward and listened.

The students were gathered for one of the 26 *Maryland Youth Forums* convened in every jurisdiction in Maryland between May, 2001 and May, 2002. Mostly in high schools or county board of education offices, with support from State Superintendent of Schools Nancy S. Grasmick and substantial help from local school superintendents, administrators, and teachers, the Attorney General engaged in discussion with teens about how they perceive their lives and what they think would help alleviate the problems that trouble them most.

Background

These youth forums were an outgrowth of the Attorney General's long-standing efforts to protect children from becoming victims and perpetrators of crime. Early on he recognized that while law enforcement's battle against both must be waged on many fronts, the most important strategy is prevention - to

help the child before he becomes the next crime statistic. After setting forth this challenge in his 1995 report, *Maryland v. Crime*, he encouraged more recognition and funding over the next few years for some of the State's best juvenile crime prevention programs through his initiative, *Spotlight on Prevention*. He also launched a statewide campaign against children's exposure to media violence, *Tune It Out!*, which challenged parents, teachers, physicians and the entertainment industry to wake up to the evidence that bombarding youth with violence in media increases aggression and violent behavior.

Along the way, the Attorney General recognized that most prevention efforts stem from *adult* perceptions of youth problems and *adult* ideas for solutions. He decided there might be something to be gained from hearing from children themselves. Thus began a year-long trek across the State to do just that - to hear how youth assess their lives, their problems, their failures and successes. Overall, the Attorney General spoke with over 700 students who were selected, at his request, as a diverse and representative cross-section of their county. In addition, the Attorney General held two forums at private schools, one at a juvenile delinquency diversion program, and one at a summer camp for at-risk teens.

"There needs to be more open communication between kids and adults."

Prince George's Co. student



Problems and Questions

“School violence is connected to all these other things we’ve been talking about, like drugs and alcohol, having nothing to do. You can’t see them as separate - they’re all connected.”

Baltimore City student

At each forum, the Attorney General asked middle and high school students a series of questions which can be grouped loosely into six categories: 1) Do you feel safe in school? Is violence a problem? Does peer mediation work to resolve conflicts and reduce violence? 2) How much of a concern is bullying in school? How prevalent is discrimination? What could we do to reduce both? 3) How widespread is tobacco, drug and alcohol abuse? How could we be more effective in preventing and reducing it? 4) How do you spend your free time, after school and on weekends? How could you be better occupied? 5) How does violence in the media affect you and your peers? What do you think of the Internet and the dangers it can pose? 6) Who can best help you when you have a problem at school or at home? What role do your parents play in your lives? Would having a mentor be of benefit to you?

Students Respond

As expected, answers varied to some degree across age groups, race and ethnicity, gender and geography. Yet more remarkable was the degree of consensus around certain themes which emerged. Those major themes are as follows:

School Violence

“There was a bomb threat recently written on the walls of the boys’ bathroom.”

Montgomery Co. student

Schools feel fairly safe, but incidents do happen which are scary, like kids bringing guns to school or threatening serious violence. One young man lamented simply, “I’d like to see no weapons.” Another recalled a recent threat and confessed, “it really angered me that someone might bring a gun to school and shoot me.” Dealing with threats is problematic, because of the difficulty distinguishing serious ones from jokes, and kids have no confidence that reporting such threats will remain confidential.

“It really angered me that someone might bring a gun to school and shoot me.”

Frederick Co. student

“Suspension is not a punishment. You have to find something kids care about.”

Queen Anne’s Co. student

Physical fights are very common, more so than serious violence, and often not addressed effectively. Perpetrators are usually suspended, which is a completely useless punishment. Kids welcome suspension as an escape from school. As one student put it, “kids don’t fear being suspended. It’s like a paid vacation.” Similarly, peer mediation, though touted as an innovative solution to student conflict, is of limited utility. Many kids view it as a joke because mediators have no real authority, and many conflicts would be resolved more effectively with adult intervention. In certain limited situations, some kids would rather deal with their peers, but more often students, as one said simply, “want to get help from an adult.”

Bullying and Discrimination

**“Bullying happens every day,
every day.”**

Wicomico Co. student

While some students do not see either bullying or discrimination as significant problems, others feel they are pivotal to their school and life experience. As one young woman described it, “bullying happens every day, every day. At school kids pick on me all the time.” Another said, “there’s always racism. People stereotype races. They think, ‘they’re dirty,’ and don’t take the chance to get to know a person.” Bullying and discriminatory treatment cause students to feel alienated and angry.

**“Things like Columbine happen
because kids get tired of being
picked on.”**

Anne Arundel Co. student

These behaviors are at the root of other problems, like substance abuse, truancy, and sometimes violence. As one student explained, “kids get made fun of, so they don’t want to be in school.” Another warned, “things like Columbine happen because kids get tired of being picked on.” Bias based on sexual preference is increasing particularly. School administrators

**“Kids need someone to show them
bullying is wrong, that it only
makes things worse.”**

Worcester Co. student

and teachers do little if anything to stop this kind of abuse, and kids are afraid of retribution if they report it. As one said, “telling causes even more trouble.” Another responded, “it does no good anyway. Nothing ever gets done about it.” At a minimum, students feel, schools should do more to stimulate and provide safe forums for open discussion of the issues. One student pleaded, “kids need someone to show them bullying is wrong, that it only makes things worse.”



Tobacco, Drug and Alcohol Abuse

SMOKING

“You should have people with lung cancer and brain tumors come talk to us.”

Baltimore Co. student

While some students perceive youth smoking as having decreased slightly, plenty of kids still smoke both on and off school grounds. One cautioned, “more kids smoke than you think.” Another offered, “kids smoke all the time - in the bathroom, everywhere. For some, all they want to do is smoke.” They start young, and do so because of peer pressure, perceptions that it is “cool,” and the influence of parents who smoke. Students view the parental factor as obvious

“By the end of the lunch mods, you can’t breathe in the bathrooms.”

Carroll Co. student

and critical; “it’s about the home. If your parents smoke, you’re going to smoke.” Teens obtain cigarettes extremely easily, either from older kids, stores which do not check I.D.’s, or parents.



Most anti-smoking messages are ineffective. One student admitted, “anti-smoking ads just remind me I have a cigarette in my pocket.” Those with any chance of being persuasive should target kids early and continue

“Anti-smoking messages are well-intentioned, but they’re viewed by kids as a joke.”

Caroline Co. student

through high school, and must be extraordinarily graphic and hardhitting, e.g., show lungs burned out by smoke, tell stories of people dying. As one put it, “we need to hear from people without much longer to live, who have wished every day they could stop.” Another emphasized, “you need to *show* what happens, not just talk about it.”

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

“Anyone can get anything. People don’t even bother to whisper about drugs anymore.”

Calvert Co. student

Drug and alcohol abuse is even more pervasive than smoking. Kids encounter both virtually everywhere they go, including school. A party is not a party without them. One mused simply, “we don’t know how to have fun without it.” Both are easy to obtain; it is just a matter of knowing which stores to patronize or who sells drugs at school. As one young man observed, “stores and drug dealers will sell to anyone. They don’t care where the money comes from.”



“When you have a party, there are beer and drugs. That’s what the party is.”

Garrett Co. student

“I know kids whose parents will buy them alcohol.”

Charles Co. student

Parents are also part of problem. Some affirmatively promote substance abuse, while others have simply given up and ignore it, or try to control usage and reduce drunk driving by allowing teens to consume it in their homes. As one student said, “most parents know their kids use stuff, but they’re in denial. They don’t want to admit their kid has a problem.” Another young woman stated matter-of-factly, “Lots of parents don’t care what their kids do. They’ll even go out and



buy alcohol for them.” Describing yet another approach, one youth explained, “some parents figure their kids

are going to do it anyway, so they stay there and take keys away. But it makes them seem like they’re promoting it.” Another sympathized, “parents are stuck in the middle. They don’t know what to do.”

“Parents act clueless, but they’re probably just turning a blind eye.

Unless it’s really bad, they don’t want to know.”

Baltimore City private school student

Students recognize the harms which flow from this pervasive use. As one asserted, “truancy and dropping out are big problems, and it’s often because of drugs and alcohol.” A rural youth emotionally recounted a recent shooting at a house party and reflected, “if there hadn’t been drinking and drugs, I believe it wouldn’t have happened.”

As with smoking, efforts to reduce substance abuse face an uphill battle; kids are likely to continue drinking and using drugs “no matter what.” Education efforts, like anti-smoking

“You can’t show us G-rated versions of the problem.”

Baltimore County private school student

messages, must begin early and be “in your face.” As one student summed it up, “you can’t show us G-rated versions of the problem.” Mothers must recount children dying of heroin overdoses; people consigned to wheelchairs from drunk driving accidents must tell their stories.

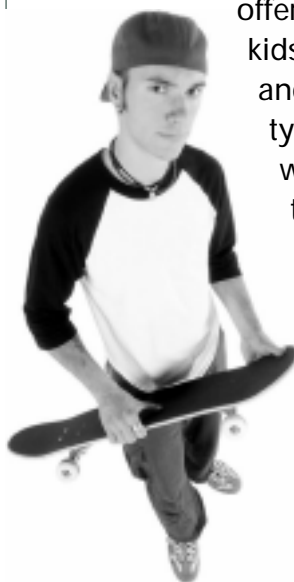
After School, Evening, and Weekend Activities

“The problem is that the kid who wants to smoke pot is the same kid who won’t participate in after school activities.”

Washington Co. student

AFTER SCHOOL

There are things to do after school if you are interested in the kinds of activities offered. The problems are that kids who need the supervision and involvement most do not typically participate, many kids who would participate have trouble getting transportation, and there are not



“It sounds pitiful, but Fox Run Shopping Center is really the only place (to go).”

Calvert Co. student

enough unstructured opportunities just to hang out with friends in a safe place. As one young man observed, "the problem is figuring out how to reach the kids who don't participate in anything. All the clubs and activities are filled with the same groups of people." Another explained, "if you want to get kids off the streets, you have to do something kids want to do - stuff that will catch on with high school students."

EVENINGS AND WEEKENDS

"If there were more options at night, fewer kids would stay home drinking and smoking pot."

Montgomery Co. student

"We get in trouble because we have nothing to do. Give us something to do."

Baltimore City student

There is definitely not enough to do on weekends, which leads to kids loitering in public places or having house parties where drugs and alcohol are ubiquitous. As one student described, "at night the only thing kids can do is hang out in the McDonald's parking lot, or sometimes the Food Lion." Another suggested, "if there were more options at night, fewer kids would stay home drinking and smoking." Students definitely believe having too much unsupervised time is risky.

"You need stuff that's fun for kids our age. People go to the VFW hall to hang out, but there are lots of drugs, fights break out, you get beat up."

Harford Co. student



As one put it, "when you have free time, you get bored, call a friend, things happen... that's how people get in trouble." Another pleaded, "we need more rec centers...that's why I got locked up. If I'd had something to do, I don't think I would have gotten in trouble."

Media Violence and Dangers on the Internet

MEDIA VIOLENCE

"Media glorifies violence."

Dorchester Co. student

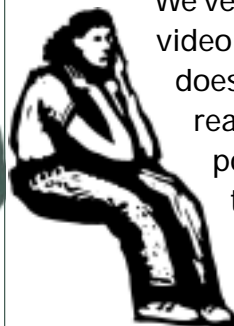
Teens are largely disdainful of the idea that they are influenced by media, even as they sit around a circle all wearing the same clothes. They acknowledge, however, that susceptibility to media violence may depend somewhat on whether a person already has a propensity for violence, and constant exposure to media violence is desensitizing. As one teen speculated, "It all depends on the person. It might affect you if you've experi-



"Some of the violence in school is because kids see it on T.V."

Baltimore City student

enced violence, or you don't know how to control your anger." Another acknowledged, "We've seen violence on T.V. and in video games since we were little. It does influence us - we just don't realize it." One focused on the power of repetition; "when I go to the movies, I can't tell you how many people I see die. You get so you don't think it matters



“When I go to the movies, I can’t tell you how many people I see die. You get so you don’t think it matters anymore.”

St. Mary’s Co. student

anymore.” Students agree that, in contrast to older kids, all young children are quite vulnerable to television and other forms of media violence, so parents should be careful to monitor exposure and explain moral implications and the difference between fantasy and reality.

INTERNET

“Insecure kids go on line to meet new friends and get lured in by strangers.”

Cecil Co. student



Most teens feel fairly savvy about avoiding the danger of interacting with strangers online, but they believe some kids are more vulnerable than others, and many youth are not careful about giving out personal information. As one related, “I know

“Parents need to be more educated about the Internet. Kids are hiding stuff.”

Queen Anne’s Co. student

people who’ve been dumb about it. They’ll chat for a couple of weeks and then go meet the person.” Blocking mechanisms to filter inappropriate material are somewhat effective, but they are not fool-proof and sophisticated teens can circumvent them, so parents should not rely on them exclusively. As one warned, “parents need to be more educated about the Internet. Kids are hiding stuff.”

Counselors, Parents and Mentors

The message here comes through loud and clear, over and over in different contexts. Teens want the help of adults when they have a problem, and parents and other adults exert more influence over youth behavior than teens would like them to believe and conventional wisdom suggests.

COUNSELORS

“You need an appointment to see a counselor. Sometimes your problem just can’t wait. You’re on the edge.”

Prince George’s Co. student

In the school setting, students lament the dearth of guidance counselors or some other adult to whom they can turn in times of crisis. When they really have a problem,

making an appointment with an overworked counselor they barely know for two weeks hence just does not cut it. As one put it, “counselors are too busy with scheduling and



“People in schools don’t make sure you’re O.K. They’ll make sure you’re on the right side of the hallway, but not that you’re really O.K.”

Harford Co. student

college prep stuff. They don’t talk to you about the really important things.” Another reflected, “People in schools don’t make sure you’re O.K. They’ll make sure you’re on the right side of the hallway, but not that you’re really O.K.”

PARENTS



“Kids need their parents to be more involved in their lives.”

Allegany Co. student

In other aspects of their lives, teens see parents as the foundation for most everything that follows. “It all starts at home... everything goes back to parents...” is the

common refrain. Students blame parents for many of their problems, credit them for many successes, and seek parental guidance as they attempt to find their own way in a complicated world. As one youth expressed the sentiment

“The best thing you can do for your child is be there.”

Somerset Co. student

of many, “everyone needs a good family base. The teachers try, but they can’t do much if we go home to bad stuff.” Another advised simply, “the best thing you can do for your child is be there.”

“I get so annoyed with my parents always asking, ‘who, what, where and when . . .,’ but I know it’s better for me.”

Howard Co. student

MENTORS

Because of this tremendous importance, youth whose parents cannot fulfill some aspects of this role need help from somewhere else. Mentors can make a critical difference for these kids. As one student observed,

“especially for kids without a strong home life, having someone to talk to can really help.”



“Mentoring is a really good idea.

It may not help everyone, but if you save one kid, it’s worth it.”

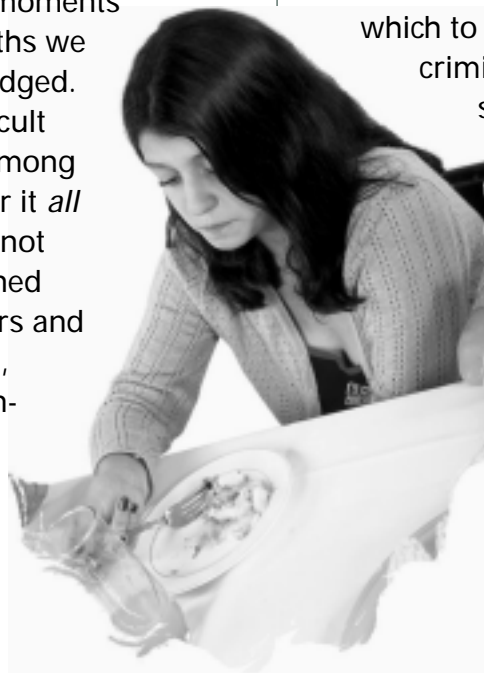
Anne Arundel Co. student

Recommendations

“When kids feel like no one will listen to them, they won’t speak out. It’s important to hear their voices.”

Prince George’s Co. student

This collective wisdom of Maryland youth calls for action on the part of all who care about their future. At times they have spoken the obvious, in other moments their stories resonate with truths we have known but not acknowledged. Some of what they say is difficult for even the most seasoned among us to accept. Yet we must hear it *all* as a wakeup call, for we have not listened well enough. Combined with the analysis of researchers and experts in youth development, these voices of our teens counsel parents, policy-makers, educators, business leaders and many others to pay more attention. Specific recommendations are set forth in this report, but highlights include:



School violence, bullying, and discrimination:

Reporting threats: Schools should establish a mechanism through which students can report threats of violence with assured and complete confidentiality.

Anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies:

County school systems should adopt model anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies which put in place a comprehensive approach to reducing these behaviors in school and the community. Components should include clearly established rules against bullying and harassment with attendant consequences, teacher training, positive relationship-building activities, closer supervision of cafeterias and other locations where bullying and harassment often occur, and parental education.

Student work groups: Schools should establish small work groups of students and teachers or counselors to provide a forum through which to air issues like bullying and discrimination, to help ensure that all students develop a meaningful relationship with at least one adult in the school, and to enable school personnel to identify problems early on before disaster strikes.

County school systems should adopt model anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies which put in place a comprehensive approach to reducing these behaviors in school and in the community.

Suspension: A task force should examine Maryland's use of suspension as an effective, primary form of discipline, and should explore better alternatives.

Schools should establish a mechanism through which students can report threats of violence with assured and complete confidentiality.

Drug, alcohol, and tobacco use:

Funding: Efforts to increase funding and resources for preventive education targeting teen tobacco, alcohol, and drug abuse should continue.

Anti-smoking and substance abuse education: Messages should be designed to communicate the tragic consequences of smoking and substance abuse in graphic, hardhitting terms, and should be communicated early and often.

Parents should be targeted with the message that their own behaviors and attitudes toward smoking and substance abuse can and will have a profound effect on their teens' decisions and behavior.

Evaluation and enforcement of laws and increased treatment: A task force should review existing laws governing teen alcohol and

substance abuse to make Maryland a cutting edge state. Funding and resources should also be allocated for increased substance abuse treatment and strict enforcement of existing laws.

Parental awareness campaign: Parents should be targeted with the message that their own behaviors and attitudes toward smoking and substance abuse can and will have a profound effect on their teens' decisions and behavior.

After school and weekend activities:

Resources and youth councils: Government and business leaders should increase public and private funding and resources for new and existing after school programs, including transportation. Youth councils should function as advisory boards to help make programs more attractive to disengaged teens.

County task forces: County governments should establish task

forces, with substantial youth representation, to examine needs and opportunities for evening and weekend youth activities.

Youth councils should function as advisory boards to help make programs more attractive to disengaged teens.



Media violence and the Internet:

Teen Safety on the Internet campaign: A public awareness campaign should be launched, perhaps through the schools and/or the Maryland Parent Teachers Association, which alerts parents and teens to the risks of unwanted



solicitations, unwanted exposure to pornography, and other dangers of the Internet and how to avoid them. Its focus should include: a) appropriate rules for teen Internet use, like never giving out personal information to anyone, never agreeing to meet someone you have met online, *etc.*; b) the importance of reporting *any* unwanted solicitations and online exposures to pornography or other inappropriate materials to law enforcement authorities and Internet service providers; and c) the importance of using filtering mechanisms, closely monitoring teen Internet use, and talking with teens about their use and exposure to materials online.

Media violence awareness: Efforts should also continue to educate parents about the importance of monitoring children and teens' exposure to media violence, and of talking with children about media content to give it context with respect to morality and the difference between fantasy and reality.



Parents and guidance services:

Hands-on Parents campaign: A public awareness campaign should be launched to communicate recent research findings that strong parental monitoring and engagement in the lives of teens reduce substantially teens' risk of substance abuse and other detrimental behaviors. The campaign should focus on how to set and enforce clear expectations and rules for teens, and how to become more involved in their lives.

Guidance services: More funding and resources should be devoted to providing guidance and other mental health services in the schools.



Recent research findings (show) that strong parental monitoring and engagement in the lives of teens reduce substantially teens' risk of substance abuse and other detrimental behaviors.

Mentoring:

Mentor Maryland: All adults in Maryland should give one hour a week to maximize the future for our children by becoming a mentor.

Mentor Maryland, a partnership between the Attorney General and Big Brothers Big Sisters,



offers a range of mentoring options to accommodate personal schedules and circumstances. Mentors' own lives will be enriched by the experience of giving back, and more of our children will avoid the pitfalls which can lead to delinquency and failure. They will instead look forward to the promising future we all want for them.

All adults in Maryland should give one hour a week to maximize the future for our children by becoming a mentor.



Conclusion



In their own words, in different ways, our children are asking not to be left alone on their journey to adulthood.

There is, of course, no magic bullet, no single answer to the puzzle of how to shepherd our children successfully through the perils of adolescence. In listening to them, however, what does become clear is that they are relying on us to do it. Their message is, at its core:

School, government, and business leaders—listen to us and give us more to do.

Parents – do not be afraid to be parents.

Everyone else – take a little time to help secure the future for a child who does not have enough adult involvement in his life.

In their own words, in different ways, our children are asking not to be left alone on their journey to adulthood. Let us answer their call.

J. Joseph Curran, Jr.
Attorney General
August 17, 2002